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Hoarding

The Humane Society of the United States



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What is animal hoarding?

According to the Hoarding Animals Research Consortium, the following criteria are used to define animal hoarding:

More than the typical number of companion animals

Inability to provide even minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter, and veterinary care, with this neglect often resulting in starvation, illness, and death

Denial of the inability to provide this minimum care and the impact of that failure on the animals, the household, and the human occupants of the home

Nearly 250,000 animals are victims of animal hoarding each year. This abuse differs from other types of animal cruelty in that the perpetrators don't always accept or recognize the cruelty they inflict on their animals. Rather, animal hoarders usually ardently believe they are saving or rescuing the animals they imprison.

How does it cause animal suffering?

Animals kept in hoarding conditions often suffer extreme neglect, including lack of food, proper veterinary care, and sanitary conditions. Officers investigating hoarding situations often find floors, furniture, and counters covered with animal feces and urine. In extreme cases, decaying animal carcasses are found among the living animals. Insect and rodent infestations are also common.

Are there other concerns?

Aside from obvious animal suffering, animal hoarding presents health hazards for the human occupants of the home. Child and adult protective services can be called to intervene when the hoarder's neglect extends beyond the animals.

Filthy conditions under which animal hoarders live also attract disease vectors such as insects and rodents. This can also threaten neighboring households. Often a house that is home to a hoarding situation must be condemned by the health department due to unlivable conditions.

Finally, animal hoarding places a tremendous strain on already-overburdened animal shelters, which lack the space or resources to deal with an influx of hundreds of animals, many of whom are usually in dire need of medical attention. Holding these animals pending the outcome of a court case may displace otherwise adoptable animals and lead to their euthanasia.

Treatment options

Although what causes animal hoarding is still poorly understood, there is a general consensus that animal hoarding is a symptom of psychological and neurological malfunctioning, which might involve dementia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. Treatment is difficult and has a low rate of success. Typically a combination of cognitive-behavioral therapy and some type of psychopharmacological intervention is recommended.

Removing animals from the hoarding situation can temporarily help solve the problem, but without long-term psychological intervention, animal hoarding has a nearly 100 percent recidivism rate. It is recommended that animal control, social service agencies, and health and housing agencies work together to treat each animal hoarding situation as a long-term project. Intervention also should involve the family of the hoarder, and any other involved members of the community.

Charging options

The animal cruelty laws of all states have provisions stipulating minimal care standards (e.g., food, shelter, veterinary care, and sanitary conditions) for animals. Legislation has been enacted in a few states specifically addressing animal hoarding.

In situations where the animal hoarder is unwilling to accept help and the animals' conditions do not warrant animal cruelty charges, non-animal agencies often step in to force change. For example, fire departments can cite hoarders for fire code violations, health departments can intervene where there are disease issues and housing code violations, and county zoning boards can step in to force change if there are local ordinances regarding the number of animals a person may keep. The charges may be necessary to help the hoarder understand the gravity of their situation.

Sentencing options

The HSUS recommends that convicted animal hoarders be sentenced to mandatory psychological evaluation and treatment and that they be restricted to owning a small number of animals; two is a reasonable number.

A lengthy probation period, during which the hoarder must agree to periodic unannounced visits from animal control to ensure compliance, is vital. In cases where animal suffering is extreme (and depending on the mental and psychological capacity of the hoarder), we favor jail time, both as a punitive measure and to help hoarders understand the serious nature of their actions.

More on this subject

Read "Rescued from Squalor," from *All Animals* magazine, July/August 2010.

Watch our free webinar "The Tipping Point: Spotting an Animal Hoarder" and see how to tell a rescue from a hoarder.